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Signposting Four Pitfalls:
A Reflection on Historical Sociology and IR

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Abstract:

In 2004 I published an argument to the effect that “taking Tilly seriously” could help International Relations (IR) scholars understand some of the processes and mechanisms involved in state-building (Leander, 2004: the chapter is pasted in at the end of this statement). This short statement is a reflection on why, if I were to write that piece today, it would be written differently. I would still argue that we should all engage the Historical Sociology of State-Building (HSS) in a serious way (go beyond the folklore as I termed it in 2004) but my inclination today would be to be far more explicit about the pitfalls of not going beyond the folklore as well as about the importance of studies of practices (in anthropology, ethnography, geography, regional/area studies or even IR, sic!) in signposting these pitfalls. This change in tone has less to do with any particular idea or argument in historical sociology, and even less with the work of any particular historical sociologist (seen the focus of this workshop Tilly will figure as the recurring reference point) than it does with the way the HSS is read, feeds into and shapes IR discussions (section 1). The way HSS has been integrated into IR has led scholars deeper into the pitfalls which hamper their understanding of contemporary state-building. More specifically it has perpetuated a misconstrued understanding of the inside/outside, it has obscured the nature and role of the private/public, and that it has devalued contextually specific articulations of politics and governance (sections 2-4). This “misunderstanding” is not only a scholastic matter as it translates into policies that are ineffective, inadequate not to say positively harmful (section 5). As the statement concludes, the implication is that IR scholars who decide to walk the terrain chartered by HSS would do well to observe the warning signposts set up by observers of political practices around these pitfalls.

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Signposting Four Pitfalls: A Reflection on Historical Sociology and IR

In 2004 I published an argument to the effect that “taking Tilly seriously” could help International Relations (IR) scholars understand some of the processes and mechanisms involved in state-building (Leander, 2004: the chapter is pasted in at the end of this statement). This short statement is a reflection on why, if I were to write that piece today, it would be written differently. I would still argue that we should all engage the Historical Sociology of State-Building (HSS) in a serious way (go beyond the folklore as I termed it in 2004) but my inclination today would be to be far more explicit about the pitfalls of not going beyond the folklore as well as about the importance of studies of practices (in anthropology, ethnography, geography, regional/area studies or even IR, sic!) in signposting these pitfalls. I would in other words be less prone unqualifiedly praise the promise of historical sociology and more concerned with signposting the pitfalls if its promise to elucidate IR about contemporary state-building processes is to have any chance of being fulfilled.

This change in tone has less to do with any particular idea or argument in historical sociology, and even less with the work of any particular historical sociologist (seen the focus of this workshop Tilly will figure as the recurring reference point) than it does with the way the HSS is read, feeds into and shapes IR discussions (section 1). The way HSS has been integrated into IR has led scholars deeper into the pitfalls which hamper their understanding of contemporary state-building. More specifically it has perpetuated a misconstrued understanding of the inside/outside, it has obscured the nature and role of the private/public, and that it has devalued contextually specific articulations of politics and governance (sections 2-4). This “misunderstanding” is not only a scholastic matter as it translates into policies that are ineffective, inadequate not to say positively harmful (section 5). As the statement concludes, the implication is that IR scholars who decide to walk the terrain chartered by HSS would do well to observe the warning signposts set up by observers of political practices around these pitfalls.

Historical Sociology of State-building/Realist International Relations

International relations is a scholarly field/discipline in constant struggle over its boundaries and its identity (as of course is any field). This is no place to expand on the sociology of the discipline.¹ However, to understand the way HSS has become part of IR, it is important to underscore that in

¹ For elaborations on the topic see e.g.

that field struggle, the state—its role, nature, origins as well as how it should be understood/studied—is a key stake. HSS was integrated in IR on the side of those who wished to confirm and refine a conventional statist (“realist”) approach.

HSS was integrated into (and also developed inside IR) as part of the ongoing debates and struggles. The context of this integration was that of the immediate post-cold war when there was a combination of two things. First, there was the debate about the shift to an *international order* that was somehow different and less focused on states than earlier. This was captured by discussions of a “new world order” (Bakker and Gill, 2003, Buzan, 1995, Slaughter, 2004) but perhaps most strongly in the focus on “globalization” which surged in this period (Clark, 1999, Scholte, 1997, Held et al., 1999, Guillen, 2001). Second, there was a related and corresponding discussion about *how states might be understood* in this context. States were no longer just states but granted a seemingly infinite number of qualifiers (post-modern, modern, pre-modern, failed, quasi, warlord, rogue...) in a flourishing literature trying to capture state transformations (Jackson, 1990, Sørensen, 2001, Bilgin and Morton, 2002). In IR the combination of the two concerns sparked a discussion about the risks associated with a non-state based order; “the coming anarchy” (Kaplan, 1994) and the “new medievalism”(Friedrichs, 2001). Our future lies in Africa as one scholar provocatively suggested (von Trotha, 2000). This is the landscape which HSS enters.

Conventional “realist” IR scholars were eager to settle the uncertainty/debates surrounding the role and nature(s) of the state in a way that confirmed the superiority, inevitability of the state based system and hence the validity of their conception of international politics. One way to do this was through the study of history. In fact, one of the conventional ways of doing IR (particularly well represented in the so called “English school” and among “classical realists”) was to work in a macro-historical and institutionally oriented fashion (Buzan, 2004). HSS appeared as a rather obvious ally and also a valuable one because of its intellectual standing/authority. This is particularly true since the IR debates coincided with the movement in historical sociology aimed (for its own complex reasons) at “bringing the state back in” (Evans et al., 1985). Moving HSS was however not only a matter of conventional IR scholars drawing on passive HSS and/or developed their own version of it. HSS scholars also drew on IR for their own purposes and spoke explicitly to the IR discipline. The way they did this was by drawing on conventional realist IR scholars (not true of Tilly as showed in 2004), hence unwittingly (perhaps?) accentuating the links between the most conventional realist versions of IR and the HSS (e.g. Giddens, 1985: ??).

The outcome was a flourishing of thought and publications in the area where HSS and conventional realist IR overlapped. The resulting literature was intent on unpacking the mechanisms by which the state and the state system emerged and functioned. It left little doubt that the state was the most efficient and effective way of organizing politics and certainly the form that had historically prevailed (Buzan and Little, 2000, Spruyt, 1994, Hobson, 1997). Nor did it seem to doubt that effective capable states were essential international order and stability (Fukuyama, 2005). Of course, within this consensus there was ample room in this for refining the argument. Realists mobilized HSS to show the malleable nature of sovereignty (e.g. Krasner, 1999). Constructivist HSS insisted on the variety of historical forms the state had taken (e.g. Thomson, 1994, Reus-Smit, 1999) and on the extent to which the state-building processes and HSS were Euro-centric (Hobson, 2004). However, it remains that HSS overlapped mostly with the most conventional and realist takes on IR, that it was used to bolster these in the discipline and that it many scholars in HSS contributed to doing this. As a consequence HSS (including the work of Charles Tilly) was read in a way which deepened the pitfalls into which IR scholars tended to fall when grappling with contemporary state-building processes.

Pitfall 1: The perpetuation of inadequate inside/outside divisions

The first pitfall IR scholars tend to fall in—and HSS has deepened—is the pitfall of an inadequate inside/outside division. This pitfall is one that arguably haunts IR in general as one of the founding marks of the discipline where IR is defined as being about the outside—“the relations among states under anarchy”—as opposed to political theory/political science which deals with politics under the ordered conditions of an inside. The degree to which this assumed contrast is productive of serious misunderstandings, exclusions and silences has been amply shown in general theoretical terms in IR (in particular of course by Walker, 1993a). The point here is to draw attention to the particular misunderstandings it introduces with regard to state-building processes and the role of HSS in reinforcing these misunderstandings.

The fact that many IR scholars (and political science scholars) have continued to work with a conventional inside/outside division when approaching state-building processes has been particularly important in blinding them to two processes in particular. The first of these is the degree to which the *outside may function as the inside* in the contemporary context (and perhaps also historically as well as *vice versa*, but this will not be discussed). The orderly political processes that these IR scholars reserve for the inside for all practical purposes develop towards the “outside”

that is the international. In the international realm a range of state institutions and power structures effectively draw states into ordered forms of politics in a whole range of areas (from finance to human rights). More than this, because of the importance of international recognition (in the international system politics run through states), “the polity” where rulers engaged in state-building processes seek legitimacy may be located outside rather than inside. State-building processes are in clear oriented towards and shaped by developments in the outside in ways which are associated with the inside in the conventional inside/outside.

A second and similarly significant process that is obscured by allowing a conventional inside/outside to structure thinking about contemporary state-building processes is *the transnational* one. NGOs, but also ethnic groups, bankers, scholars and bureaucrats are part of processes that are located neither inside nor outside but running across. Yet these processes play a fundamental role in state-building processes, not only because they shape state-building processes but because they refashion the conditions on which it is taking place. This point has been many times with regard to states in Africa (forcefully formulated e.g. by Clapham, 1996) but of course it can also be elaborated with regard to states in the rest of the world as argued for example with regard to Europe (Bigo, 2000).

The way HSS has been integrated into IR has accentuated rather than alleviated the difficulties IR scholars have with seeing state-building processes as beyond the inside/outside divide. HSS has reinforced that division and the centrality of that categorization. Arguments are framed in terms that repeat and reinforce the centrality of the inside/outside distinction in thinking. In Tilly’s account for example, the outside is the site where war takes place that places pressure on rulers to mobilize resources (and especially increase monopolize coercion and capital), develop administrative state structures to this end and eventually to “civilianize” their regimes. One can moderate this (as I did in 2004) by pointing to the places where Tilly’s account is not structured by a strict outside/inside division with classical connotations. One can also draw on Tilly’s own discussions of contemporary statehood and state-building processes to underscore that to the master himself explicitly attempted to qualify and rethink the inside/outside division (Tilly, 1992, 1994). However, such efforts are unlikely to fundamentally reverse the way that Tilly’s work reinforces an inadequate inside/outside understanding. The role Tilly (and HSS more widely) has played in IR debates, makes IR scholars prone to disregard the spaces they open up for thinking beyond the conventional inside/outside distinctions.

Pitfall 2: The obscuring of public/private enmeshment

The second pitfall HSS and Tilly's work deepens is that created by the public/private divide. This pitfall is in many respects analogous to the previous one in that it is a foundational distinction in IR which HSS in general and Tilly in particular are in no way responsible for creating, but which their integration on the side of conventional IR scholars focusing on the state has tended to reinforce. The issue at stake here—and discussed most intensely in IPE—is that IR (and arguably political science more generally) has been prone to reduce politics to what takes place and consequently to focus on what states do, how and why. However, the consequence of this narrow focus is not only an obscuring of politics but a misunderstanding of states and the state system as well as the limits of these (the point is forcefully made in Strange, 1998, 1999). The way HSS has been integrated has reinforced this tendency.

With regard to state-building processes this is important because it obscures two central aspects of contemporary processes. The first is the growing *enmeshment of the public and private spheres* in contemporary states. There are plenty of state-qualifiers that have been developed to express this merger of the public and private particularly for states in the developing world. Patrimonial, clientelistic, kleptocratic, predatory or criminal are some examples (Bayart et al., 1997, Evans, 1989). But discussions about the shadow, the real, the privatized or the warlord state are attempts to find wording for the same phenomenon (Reno, 1998, Hibou, 2004, Chabal and Daloz, 1999). It may be significant in this context to point out that enmeshment is far from a developing world phenomenon. The increase in PPPs across all sectors has made it a general phenomenon (Minow, 2003, Leander, 2009).

This leads straight onto a second and related development namely the trend towards an *enmeshment of public and private forms of government* in contemporary states. There is no need to be a strict Foucauldian to capture the centrality of liberal thinking about governance wherein governance through markets (or quasi-markets), decentralization, empowerment and responsabilization play a key role (Hindess, 2004, Bayart, 2004, Bislev et al., 2002). The new public management revolution but also the focus on good governance, democratization accountability and transparency are the most tangible expressions of these overarching shifts (De Sousa et al., 2009, Hindess, 2005, Power, 1997). Their consequence is of a profound transformation of the way that states operate and exert their power (as persuasively shown e.g. for the Tunisian context by Hibou, 2006, or for the Egyptian context by Elyachar, 2005). Departing from and working with a

conventional public/private distinction, is not only a way of down-toning the significance of enmeshment from the outset. It renders it very difficult to focus on or place it at the heart of a study.

The effect of HSS has been to further reinforce the already strong inclination of conventional IR scholars to depart from a conception of the public/private divide that does more to hinder than to assist their efforts to grasp state-building processes. The reason is partially that their argumentation is that the argumentation is structured in these terms. For example, the construction of a state administrative apparatus—which Tilly sees as the logical outcome of the rulers' need to monopolize and manage financial and coercive resources—is an unambiguously public apparatus that becomes even more public when it is civilianized. When this reasoning is taken into IR, it focuses attention on the “public” side of the public/private divide at the expense of the private and more importantly the enmeshed. Even more strongly, HSS (including Tilly) has been mobilized in IR against the emerging research on the “private” side of the public/private divide—as exemplified for example by work on of “private authority” or of “private regimes” (Cutler et al., 1999, Hansen and Salskov-Iversen, 2008). The HSS is invoked to situate the contemporary process of state-building in the developing world as merely at an “earlier”, “pre-modern” stage, and (consequently). It has been used as a warning against reading too much into the role of the private (and enmeshed). Enmeshment is something to be overcome rather than something to be studied and integrated into the understanding of state-building processes (e.g. Ayoob, 1995, Sørensen, 2001, Ghani and Lockhart, 2008). It is therefore not surprising to find many of the scholars who work on state-building processes in IR and who wish to take into account the public/private enmeshment highly critical of the way that HSS has deformed and shaped thinking on the subject (e.g. Badie, 1992, Clapham, 1996, Buur et al., 2007).

Pitfall 3: The devaluation of context

This leads straight onto the next pitfall that has been deepened by the way HSS has overlapped and been integrated into IR; namely the tendency to devalue context. Indeed, IR is replete with generalizing and universalizing assumptions that tend to erase contextual variation from the picture. For example, conventional IR has worked with the assumption that “states are like units” (e.g. Waltz, 1979). What precisely this means is a source of never ending discussion in IR focused on how variations in identity, in national interests and/or in national politics should be accounted for and integrated into the study. Against this backdrop it should come as no surprise that the HSS tended to accentuate the already existing inclination to disregard context.

This matters first because it has led to a corresponding devaluation *context specific and local governance processes* already in place where state-building processes have been studied. The willingness of IR scholars working at the intersection of HSS and IR to adopt universalizing categories, look at only specific kinds of processes and expect only specific results (a very specific kind of Westphalian/Weberian state) prompted them to ignore, misunderstand and devalue alternative forms of governance (e.g. Duffield, 2001, Mbembe, 2001, particularly the essay on “private indirect government”). This hampers adequate analysis of governance structures and hence of the issues/conflicts that are bound to emerge in state-building processes.

More than this, the devaluation of context unduly hinders *practical political imagination*. Thinking politics beyond and/or outside established categories is a possibly impossible task (e.g. Bauman, 1999). However, thinking about state-building processes looking at the local context is a way not only to open up for the possibility that governance may function otherwise than assumed. It is also (through this) a way of generating ideas about practical political possibilities (and their limits). The recurring protests against the Eurocentrism, universalism and blueprint-inspired ways of conceiving of state-building processes are best understood from this perspective (Hirschman, 1967, Amsden et al., 1994).

HSS was prone to reinforce this devaluation of context not to alleviate it. The teleology that can easily be read into the macro-sociological work in the HSS is one of reasons. A version of the European state is readily construed as the only probable and possible outcome (for this argument in detail e.g. Badie and Birnbaum, 1983). The consequence is not only that the extreme violence of that state is overlooked (Bauman, 1989, Sofsky, 1996, Walker, 1993b) but that any deviance from the path becomes an anomaly to be corrected. The extent to which scholars of HSS are aware of these readings and usage of their work/ideas is a good indicator of the extent to which the HSS takes on a life of its own beyond the control of its originators. Tilly for example interestingly spent considerable time redressing interpretations of his work that disregarded context and/or alternative forms of governance and politics and possibly statehood. Not only did he revisit his own arguments on state formation in light of contemporary developments (in the already cited Tilly, 1992, 1994). Tilly also insisted (and with characteristic attention to detail and context) on the conditions under which collective violence *did not* usher in state-building processes or pressure to “civilianize” the state (Tilly, 2003) as well as on the great importance of the contextual in shaping the process that might prompt state-building processes (Tilly, 2006). These works are unlikely to alter the context

devaluating effects of the slogan “war makes states and states make war” as it has come to be deployed in IR.

Pitfall 4: Misconstrued Policies

Pitfall 4 that HSS tends to deepen and lead IR scholars into is the pitfall of misconstrued policies and policy recommendations. Arguably this is not really a pitfall in its own right but the compounded consequence of walking into the three pitfalls just discussed. Yet it seems important to make the point explicit. The misunderstandings and misconceptions just discussed are not merely of scholastic interest either as part of purely intellectual discussions around state-building processes or as part of the struggles in the academic field of IR. IR scholars are part and parcel of shaping policies. A long standing Machiavelli/ Kissinger complex (with analogies in other disciplines) makes the position of “advisor to the prince” a goal and an important part of the career for many scholars in IR. More than this, IR is a rapidly expanding area of education that produces and sanctions legitimate knowledge. As such its misconceptions and misunderstandings have ramifications beyond the narrow circle of scholars who work in the field.

Two kinds of ramifications of the misunderstandings resulting from the way that HSS has been imported into are of particular salience. The first of these is the way that the misunderstanding they produce feed into *policies that are ineffective when not outright harmful*. The misrecognition of context, of public-private enmeshment and of the inside/outside hinders the policies designed to develop stable states, functioning institutions and “local capacities”. The policies that seen as so pivotal to stability in the 21st Century (Fukuyama, 2005) and which IR scholars seem to have a peculiarly central role in promoting. More than this, the lack of understanding of contexts may make the policies little more than an extension of empires by other means at terrible costs for people whose forms of life and livelihood are disqualified in the process (Chandler, 2006, Duffield, 2007).

The second and related ramification is the way the misunderstandings *undermine reflexive capacity* and hence the possibility of learning and correcting mistakes. Approaching the world with the certainty of established knowledge based on the authoritative voices of the past (seen as confirmed by the HSS) has made it very difficult for conventional IR scholars approaching state-building processes to seriously reflect on whether or not the policies pursued are really more an expression of their problems and obsessions than they are of the central issues in the context

observed. A form of Saidian orientalism can continue to rule undisturbed (Said, 1995). More than this it seems to hamper serious reflections on the actual dilemmas involved in policies directed at encouraging state-building processes. A case in point is the rather surprising incapacity to confront the rather obvious dilemmas created by the “local ownership” mantra. The obvious dilemmas created when local ownership pulls in directions unwanted by those striving to promote robust states and stable institutions are not confronted but ignored (Narten, 2008). Those involved in policy making are of course aware of the dilemmas but refrain from explicitly reflecting upon them. For example, UK civil servants engaged in SSR in Sierra Leone were asked three times (and chose not to answer) about how they limited and dealt with the dilemmas of local ownership (DIIS Public Seminar, 2009).

The HSS in general and Tilly in particular are obviously not responsible for the prevalence of misconstrued policies. The point here is about the way their authority has been mobilized and instrumentalized in ways that perpetuate misconstrued policies. There is clearly nothing inevitable about this. There is no reason why HSS (and the work of Tilly) could not be mobilized differently and integrated into IR to lend authority to constructions that steer clear of the pitfalls including the one of producing misconstrued imperial policies. One might imagine attempts to salvage HSS—including Tilly’s approach to state-building processes—from their usage in IR analogous to Katzenstein’s efforts at salvaging “civilization” from its Huntingtonean connotations (Katzenstein, 2009). (Who knows perhaps this project will be a contribution?) To ease that salvaging, following the warning signpost set up by those working on the political practices is most likely to be important.

Of Practical Signposts

The key contention in this statement has been that interesting, inspiring and stimulating as it may be HSS and the work of Charles Tilly on state-building processes—in particular—has had a tendency to leave IR scholars stuck in the pitfalls they have an inclination to get stranded in. Four (or three and a summary) pitfalls have been pointed to with an emphasis on the way the usage, mobilization and integration of HSS (with Tilly as the recurring example) in IR—rather than its content or meaning—have heightened rather than decreased the likelihood that IR scholars get stuck in one or all of them. These pitfalls are far from unknown to IR scholars. On the contrary heated debates have ranged over them literally since IR emerged as an academic discipline (in the immediate post-World War 2 period). Hence there are plenty of sign-posts surrounding each of the pitfalls including signposts specifically signaling pitfalls IR scholars thinking about state-building processes in the

contemporary (post-Tillean?) context tend to fall in. These signposts have been put up by other IR scholars in conjunction with others working on state-building processes in a variety of subjects who have in common that they in various ways focus on the practices that go into these processes. Many have been quoted in the course of the argument.

My statement amounts to saying in so many words that IR scholars need to pay far more attention to these signposts when they approach the landscape of state-building processes. The signposts around the characteristic pitfalls of IR approaches to state-building processes are not mere expressions of positional academic flag-waving or irrelevant works of art produced by unknowing outsiders. Reading HSS in general and Tilly on state-building processes in particular as providing the necessary authority (as well as a comforting excuse) to disregard them is not a wise move. It would be commendable if IR scholars were to pick up the many currents, arguments and indications in HSS (and in Tilly) that can be read as reinforcing the warning messages on the signposts instead. This is what I meant by going beyond the folklore in 2004. The reason I would write the article differently today is that the prospects of this actually happening seem remote and therefore being blunt about the pitfalls is important.

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